

ONE

Letter Writing and Paper Connoisseurship in Elite Households in Early Modern England



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Writing a letter requires a series of small but consequential decisions based on two baseline questions: What is my relationship to the recipient of my letter? What do I hope to achieve by writing it? The answers to these questions dictate the style, content, and materiality of a letter. In the early modern period in particular, material aspects such as the quality and size of paper, the style of handwriting, and the way in which a letter was folded and sealed were significant indicators of the sender's intent, reflecting a complex and unwritten set of sociomaterial practices communicated by example rather than by rule.

A letter from one of Queen Elizabeth I's favorites, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, to clerk of the signet Thomas Windebank, offers a window into the technological difficulties one might face in preparing a letter to be sent. Cecil describes an exquisitely written letter from Queen Elizabeth to King James VI of Scotland, which he is tasked with sealing and sending, as being written "in the style with those of the House of Florence, as Buchanan's scholar will blush when he reads it." He continues in his praise: "But it was not for nothing, that the son of Catherine de Medicis was so far gone with Sir John Smith's *muy linda e poderosa Reina*."¹ The queen's letter is untraced, but from this brief description we learn that it is

both eloquent and powerful, diplomatically and personally. Cecil would have known that the queen wished to have it sealed in the same fashion as her other personal letters to James VI, but it was past eleven at night, he was “very near his pillow-bere [pillowcase],” and his options were limited. Thus, he includes an important postscript: “Tell her Majesty that I will try how finely I can seal up her letter, but my house is such a Friary now, without any women, as If she send not my Lady Scudamore to me with a Needle and a thread, I must go to some of my Neighbours either at Essex house or Russell house for some of those utensils. If you find that the Queen will be content to be put out of her, *Passer solitarius in tecto*, tell her some of these toys of mine.”²

In this extraordinary passage, Cecil reveals his quandary: he is surrounded only by men at his lodgings at the Savoy, none of whom possesses the skills to seal the queen’s letter according to her specifications. He asks Windebank to ask the queen to send him one of her most trusted confidantes and sometime bedfellow, Mary Scudamore, Lady Scudamore, with a needle and thread. In exchange for sending out Lady Scudamore, as “a sparrow on a roof,” he jokingly suggests that Windebank share some of Cecil’s “toys”—that is, some of his jokes or puns—with the queen. If Windebank did not succeed in having the queen dispatch Lady Scudamore to Cecil’s house, Cecil would be forced to seek out the ladies of Essex House or Russell House for the proper “utensils.” These aristocratic women were not far from his lodgings—they were also located south of the Strand between Ivybridge Lane and Middle Temple—while the queen and her gentlewomen of the bedchamber were at Richmond Palace, more than ten miles down the river, in Surrey.

Why would Cecil need a woman to seal a letter from the queen, and why, specifically, Lady Scudamore? What feminine skills and “utensils” were needed?³ Why wouldn’t the queen seal it herself? After all, the technology of sealing is fairly straightforward: expose a stick of hard wax to a heat source until it softens, let it drip onto the closed letter, and then swiftly apply the seal matrix with firm pressure and a slight rocking motion, either directly on the wax or on a piece of paper covering the wax. This task was completed thousands of times a day, by thousands of men and women across Europe.

In this pre-envelope era, letters were written on the front side of either a bifolium (a sheet of paper folded in half, creating four pages) or on a single half sheet.⁴ The letter was then folded into a rectangular packet for sending. The sender would write the address on the outside of the packet, providing more or less detail depending on whether the letter was being sent by a common carrier or a trusted servant or friend. The recipient’s first encounter with the letter was a folded and sealed packet, addressed in a way that conveyed the letter’s purpose, whether it be official business, confidential information, household updates,

gratitude, apology, a favor, love.⁵ Another important contextual clue to a letter's purpose was the mode of delivery: common carrier, servant, personal bearer, secretary, confidante.⁶ In many cases, the person delivering the letter conveyed the most important messages orally, the text of the letter itself serving as a credential authorizing the bearer to serve as the letter writer's surrogate.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, there were a handful of dominant techniques for folding and sealing a letter, with many variations.⁷ These variations could be localized to a particular person, a particular pair of correspondents, or a particular coterie, or exist within larger more porous social networks. The same person could use different packeting styles for different purposes. The technologies behind the folds appear to be entirely undocumented by contemporaries. While there are no mentions in the conduct literature or letter-writing manuals of the period, the style of closure clearly played a role in the reception of a letter and the technology must have been transferred person-to-person.

The most common method for creating a packet was the simple tuck-and-seal method; men and women of all social classes used this format for everyday communications. It was simple because no cutting was required; all that was needed was sealing wax, a seal matrix, and a heat source. One side of the folded letter is tucked into the other side, and the seal is applied to the seam. When the seal is broken or removed upon opening, a small fragment of paper is often torn off with it (see fig. 1.1). Other, more complicated and secure techniques, seen in correspondence between political and aristocratic elites, required much more time and expertise. For example, a triangle- or sword-shaped paper "lock" could be cut from a blank part of the paper on which the letter itself is written, and then carefully tapered and pushed through a slit in the multilayered folds of the packet that was either perpendicular or parallel to the fore edge. The small flap that emerged from the slit was flattened and melted wax was placed on it. The other end of the strip was then wrapped around the fore edge onto the wax and pressed into place with a seal matrix. The superscription, or address, was written partially on the paper lock and partially on the packet. Since the recipient had to tear or cut the paper lock in order to read the letter, the letter was essentially tamper-proof, since it could not be resealed using the original triangle strip, with its tell-tale matching laid lines, chain lines, and handwriting. Although the paper lock was usually discarded upon receipt, remnants on hundreds of surviving letters, as well as surviving slits and partially obscured superscriptions (because some of the text was written on the now-missing paper lock) on thousands of others, allow us to recover the letterlocking techniques used, and as a result, better understand the intentions of senders and the expectations of recipients.

To call these styles of closure "locks" is perhaps anachronistic, implying that all letters were sealed to avoid interception or prying eyes. In some cases this

For Mr. Hattis affairs.

On the 2. honorable my brother
good l. the 2. Admirall
of England.

your
servant
servant

your
servant for
lieut.

W. Cecil

London. 26. Aug
at 9. in the
morning.

Figure 1.1.a. Front of a letter packet opened and then refolded using the simple tuck and seal method, with a tear and wax residue remaining at the location of the removed seal. Letter from William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to Charles Howard, Lord Admiral, August 26, 1588, MS X.d.494, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

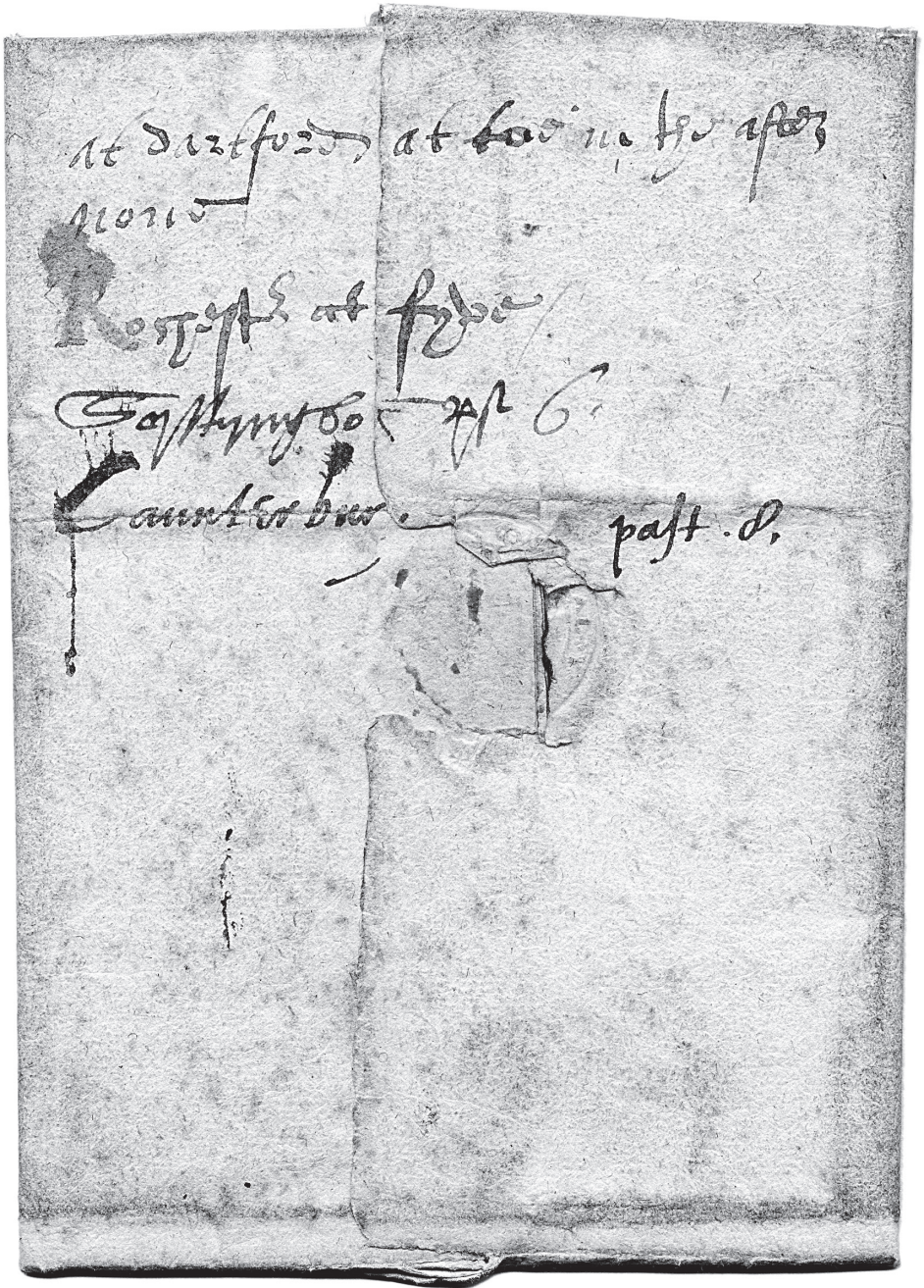


Figure 1.1.b. Back of a letter packet opened and then refolded using the simple tuck and seal method, with a tear and wax residue remaining at the location of the removed seal. Letter from William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to Charles Howard, Lord Admiral, August 26, 1588, MS X.d.494, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

may be true, but in the majority of surviving letters, the type of closure reflected a form of sociability, hospitality, networking, and identity formation. The extent to which someone individualized a form of closure reflected the extent to which that person wanted the closure to be noticed as part of the letter's meaning.

Going back to Cecil's "friary" problem: the fact that Cecil was in need of a woman to provide the needle, thread, and sewing expertise to seal the queen's letter indicates that the letter required a different sealing technique altogether. Material evidence on hundreds of surviving letters indicates that the queen wanted her letter to be pleated and closed with silk embroidery floss and wax seals.⁸ First, a letter written on a fine, thin piece of paper (usually Venetian) was folded in half from top to bottom three or four times to create six or eight pleats, or long, narrow panels. This packet was then folded so that the two edges joined, in order to create a small rectangular packet roughly one inch wide and three inches long. Silk floss was then either wrapped around the fore edge of the folded packet multiple times and sealed in place on both sides of the packet or woven through a hole or holes in the packet, if extra security was desired. In some surviving examples, the floss was wrapped around *both* sides of the packet before being secured with small seals on both sides, resembling a modern gift-wrapped package, albeit with a seal, rather than a bow (see plates 1 and 2).

Cecil had no way to access silk floss in his "friary"—it was kept in women's spaces, such as the closet, the bedchamber, or other social gathering spots for women in aristocratic households, where they sewed, read, played music, and wrote letters.⁹ Even if he could locate it among their coffers, chests, and desks, his early humanist education was very different from the education of aristocratic girls in the interconnected arts of sewing, reading, and writing. The gatekeepers for access to needles and silk floss in his household were absent, and only another woman, preferably Lady Scudamore, would have the knowledge to find the right utensils and use them appropriately. The women of Essex House and Russell House, though his near neighbors and kinswomen, were politically toxic because Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, was under house arrest at York House after a spectacularly unsuccessful campaign against the Irish rebels. Essex had recently entered a truce with the Irish chieftains and then deserted his post in Ireland and returned to England against the wishes of the queen, and his future was currently being weighed by the queen (he was executed twelve months later). At the time of his "friary" letter to Windebank, Cecil was closely involved in these deliberations.

This is not the first time that the queen specified how a letter she had written should be folded and sealed. Four years earlier, in 1596, Sir Thomas Lake informed Cecil that the queen wished to retrieve from Cecil an as-yet unsent letter she had written so that it could be reopened "and folded in a small plight

[pleat] like those of her own hand, and so sealed.”¹⁰ The letter was from Elizabeth to Catherine de Bourbon, the King of France’s sister.¹¹ This request reveals Elizabeth’s concern that the letter’s method of folding and closure match the intimate and reassuring style of the letter’s textual message. It needed to be “pleated” into a small packet and closed with silk floss.

Indeed, an examination of several hundred examples of silk-flossed letters reveals a clear pattern of physical features: most are written on fine Italian paper, in an italic rather than a secretary script, and in the handwriting of the sender rather than by a secretary. The address on the superscription indicates that the letter is to be conveyed by a trusted bearer, dispensing with full names or descriptive locations in favor of more affectionate addresses. The content, too, of letters secured with silk floss, follows a pattern that seeks to solidify or restore preestablished social bonds: sending a gift, expressing gratitude and respect, requesting a favor, or offering one’s service. The tone is often less formal than usual because of the familiarity between correspondents, reflecting or aspiring to a relationship of trust, confidence, and intimacy. This bond is further enforced by the time taken to apply the silk floss, and by the choice of colors used, which could convey symbolism as well: black when the sender was in mourning or pink for fidelity, for example.

When these attributes are combined, the small packet, conveyed into the recipient’s hands by a trusted bearer, becomes something greater than a simple letter: an intimate token of love and affection even if the text itself is not a love letter. Alison Wiggins describes the silk-flossed letters received by Bess of Hardwick “as the products of a culture of epistolary politeness, and as gifts in themselves,” shiny, silky, colorful, pretty tokens rather than substantive texts.¹² Similarly, Rayne Allinson writes that letters written in Queen Elizabeth’s own handwriting “were a particularly personal kind of gift, since they embodied a trace of the monarch-author’s metaphysical presence” while at the same time carrying the expectation of reciprocity.¹³ If the letter not only was in the queen’s autograph but followed the other conventions of the pleated silk-flossed letters as well—the folds, the paper, the script, the tone, the silk embroidery floss—the effect upon the recipient was multiplied (see plate 2).

The earliest silk-flossed letters in England appear in Elizabeth’s correspondence with the Duke of Anjou during their marriage negotiations in 1579–1581. Like many fashions, it was initially adopted by her most intimate associates, the Earl of Leicester followed by the Earl of Essex, before radiating outward to their wives, daughters, and sisters, who used the technique sparingly so as not to dilute its exclusivity. The majority of surviving silk-flossed letters from the Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods emanate from a few interrelated circles of influential and well-educated aristocratic men and women associated mainly with the Sid-

ney, Russell, Hastings, and Essex households. Receiving or sending a silk-flossed letter was an invitation to this exclusive club.

While a pleated letter secured with silk floss was ostensibly a private and intimate form of communication, as Cecil's "friary" problem indicates, it would most likely not have been created in isolation. The sociomaterial practices that went into creating a letter in an early modern elite household or secretariat, from selecting the paper, preparing the ink and quill, writing, subscribing, signing, folding, wrapping in embroidery floss or creating a form of paper lock, sealing, and superscribing, were embedded in complementary technologies and spaces, and dependent on a range of variables and people.¹⁴ Cecil's predicament points to Ruth Oldenziel's observation that certain modes of production are "embedded in the family economy, in which family members shared their talent, capital and time."¹⁵ This integrated production method falls apart when there is domestic imbalance. But to suggest that silk-flossing was a gendered activity does not point to the complexity of the letter-writing environment. While it is probably safe to suggest that male secretaries tended to use paper locks and women were the suppliers of silk floss and needles for creating pleated silk-flossed letters, we simply cannot know the full extent to which the skill sets were interchangeable. We rely on passing allusions and the material objects themselves to create a narrative that makes sense. Cecil, as most likely did the other leading men in Elizabeth's court, deferred to female knowledge and skills in order to execute the queen's wishes: that her letter be flossed and sealed in order to convey the right message to its recipient. The final result is a seemingly private communication that has in fact been written by the queen (or drafted first by Cecil for the queen's approval), edited, copied out by the queen in her own handwriting, sent by Windebank back to Cecil for sending, delayed by Cecil until he found someone who could close it "finely" with needle and thread, and then given to a bearer to present to King James in Edinburgh.

Wiggins observes that "letters with ribbon and floss remind us that letters are things themselves."¹⁶ Telling the story of these things through the example of a moment of failure—Cecil's inability to finely seal a letter without access to any women—helps us to focus on the skills and tools behind the production of early modern letters, and to recognize the connection between message and materiality forged by the collaborative work of the queen's extended household. It takes the work of many to make it seem like the work of one.

UNDERSTANDING FINE PAPER

The second part of this essay explores what happens when you move an inanimate agent—in this case, early modern writing paper—from the background into the foreground. Paper is the foundation for written communication, yet

overlooked by historians as a category of analysis. It was used by men and women alike to reinforce and establish social distinctions, hierarchical relationships, and alliances. The quality, size, whiteness, smoothness, and origin of paper have the power to signify as much as the text itself. Indeed, the intentions of early modern letter writers can in part be gleaned not only from the way they folded and sealed their letters but also from their paper choices. Paper was a nuanced and flexible substrate, embedded with codes of social behavior hidden in plain sight.

The paper historian Ruby Reid Thompson writes that “a significant element of personal taste and preference determines the choice of a certain quality and format of paper by a particular individual.”¹⁷ Stationers, haberdashers, and other vendors sold many different varieties of papers, in a range of quantities, sizes, prices, and qualities. Individuals generally purchased paper by the quire (twenty-five sheets), but occasionally by the ream (twenty quires, or five hundred sheets). Manuscript account books and receipts suggest a wide range of availability. For example, Ordinary, Fine, Best, Best (second size), Demy, Royal, Royal Italian, Royal Best, Imperial, Imperial Best, Dutch, Dutch Fine, Dutch Royal, Frankfurt, Troyes Demy, Venice, Venice Demy, Ruled, White, Writing, Pot, Gilt, and Gilt Large all appear in account books from 1570 to 1640. The terminology was not fully standardized, with names referring to quality, size, type of watermark, place of production, or some combination thereof.¹⁸ Writing paper was sized with animal gelatin to prevent the iron gall ink from sinking into paper, and it needed a smooth and receptive surface in order for the nib of the quill pen to do its best work. Different qualities of paper required different nib-cutting and blotting techniques, and a writer needed to understand a sheet of paper’s specific material attributes before selecting a pen.

Helen Smith rightly observes that the convenient literary trope of paper as a passive, virginal, and often gendered surface largely contradicted reality.¹⁹ Some writers recognized an alternative trope: instead of a sheet of paper as a meaningless and innocent blank space in need of inky activation, a sheet of paper needed to be interpreted so that the ink could perform accordingly and effectively. For example, Nehemiah Rogers compared the relationship between a preacher and his audience to that of a penman and his paper. A writer must cut his nib according to the type of paper he writes upon: paper with a “hard and crosse graine” will damage a “Tender Penn,” paper with a “fine, and tender graine” works best with a “smaller penn” and “Ordinarie Paper,” and “Pot-paper of a middle nature” requires a nib that is “neither too soft, nor too hard.”²⁰ Presumably this metaphor resonated with his readers because of their firsthand experience of mismatching nib to paper.

The size of the paper conveyed meaning as well. An etiquette manual published in 1675 encourages letter writers to “make use of large Paper rather than

small, and a whole sheet (though we write but six lines in the first Page) rather than half a one [a quarto bifolium], is no inconsiderable piece of ceremony, one shewing reverence and esteem, the other familiarity or indifference.”²¹ Thomas Docksie included an apologetic postscript in an update to his master, Sir Walter Bagot, in 1612: “I must crave pardon for writing on so bad paper for I have lost the key of my desk and can come to no other.”²² The smaller size of the paper, less than half of a sheet, suggests that it was cut from part of the address leaf of a bifolium letter (a standard letter was a bifolium, or a sheet folded in half). It has blots and stains that might have been on the paper before he wrote his letter, since the bottom blot appears to be cut in half. He did not want to offend his master by using paper inappropriate to the message, and so drew attention to the locked writing desk to avoid impropriety.

It is also possible that the presence of deckle edges on a sheet of paper, or unevenly trimmed edges, could have an ill effect on the sender’s intentions. The poet Philip Sidney opens a formal letter to the queen with: “This rude piece of paper shall presume because of your Majesty’s commandment.”²³ Sidney’s letter is written on a bifolium, or folded sheet of paper, with an ordinary pot watermark and unevenly trimmed edges: perhaps not the sort of paper fit for a queen. Similarly, one of the Duke of Anjou’s love letters to the queen begins by asking forgiveness since the letter is not written on such fine paper nor with such delicacy and dignity as he could wish, as he is in an inconvenient place.²⁴ The paper is cut from a much larger sheet, and has unevenly trimmed edges. In a Latin letter from Dr. Pierre Beutterich to D. Rogers in November 1578, Beutterich laments the poor reception in England of a letter of his to Queen Elizabeth, explaining: “If the writing was not very elegant nor the paper very fine, that was because I wrote it in my tent with my knees for a table.”²⁵ Passing comments like these force us to look at the substrate more carefully, and reconsider what we might be missing. In these examples, the writers attempt to create a boundary between the paper’s rudeness or badness and their own good intentions, suggesting that without explicit intervention, the poor quality of paper could somehow reflect the moral integrity of the writer. In fact, paper could be a tool for inclusion and identity formation, defining relationships and networks.

We know that some types of writing paper were better than other types because of their names and prices in account books. For example, gilt, fine, best, royal, large, and imperial all indicate expensive and high-quality paper. Bureaucratic letters occasionally include requests for fine paper, such as William Herle’s request for a quire of fine paper and some hard wax for sealing letters from the Bishop of Ross in 1571, or, in the same year, the Bishop of Ross’s receipt of a ream of fine paper from Mr. George Hackert, or, in 1640, Sir William Galley’s request to Richard Harvey for a ream of “good fine writing paper.”²⁶ The most striking exam-

ple of an elite person acquiring multiple qualities of paper is Bess of Hardwick, the wealthiest and most powerful woman in England after the queen. On June 25, 1592, she purchased 1,600 sheets of writing paper in London, including 2 reams of pot paper (1,000 sheets), 6 quires of Frankfurt paper (300 sheets), and 6 quires of Venice paper (300 sheets).²⁷ On the same day and from the same shopkeeper, one Mr. Prescott, she also purchased hard and soft wax for sealing letters, and many yards of silver cloth, black satin, and black velvet. Bess displayed her wealth and power in monumental ways, building Chatsworth, a grand country house, commissioning massive embroidery projects, and consolidating her wealth through her own four marriages and the marriages of her children and stepchildren. She was a busy correspondent and accountant who needed different types of paper for different purposes, in addition to materials for making clothing and other luxury goods. It would have been obvious to her and the recipients of her letters that the pot paper (produced in Normandy, with a pot watermark), at 4 pence a quire, would have been used for day-to-day business and family correspondence and notes, while the higher-quality Frankfurt paper and Venice paper, at 10 pence a quire and just over 7 pence a quire, respectively, were reserved for more important letters that needed to communicate power and prestige.²⁸

Perhaps the easiest-to-spot examples of fine paper in the wild are letters written on Venice paper, noticeably thinner, smoother, and lighter in color than pot paper, with a double pennant on a flagstaff watermark (fig. 1.2). Venice paper, typically slightly smaller than pot paper, was often used for letters circulating in elite circles, conveying respect, humility, and gratitude and reinforcing social bonds between women, between men, and between men and women. For example, the poet John Donne's eight groveling letters in early 1602 to his father-in-law, Sir George More and employer, Lord Keeper Thomas Egerton, after his clandestine marriage to Anne More, are written on Venice paper. The rhetoric and the location of Donne's signature on these letters suggest humility and poverty, while the paper itself speaks power and luxury despite his troubled circumstances.²⁹ Not surprisingly, letters sent from Elizabeth's palaces in the 1590s and by Cecil's secretariat also tended to be written on Venice paper.³⁰

A letter's meaning and intent could be further strengthened if the fine paper had gilt edges. Thomas Massinger's manual *The Secretary in Fashion* (1654) recommends that letters should be written in a fair hand, "upon fine perfumed and gilded paper (if you please) and with large Margins." We may never be able to detect four-hundred-year-old perfume on a letter, and on paper so thin the presence of gilt is almost imperceptible to the naked eye; in fact, Robert Hooke reported to the Royal Society in July 1665 that he had made a microscopic observation of the "very smooth and even gilt edge of fine Venice-paper" as well as of a moth wing and "fine lawn" (a kind of linen) in order to reveal the intricacy of the



Figure 1.2. An example of a watermark on Venice paper, on a letter from the Earl of Middlesex to Sir Robert Pye, February 12, 1623/24, MS X.d.134, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

substrates.³¹ The intimacy of discovering the presence of a gilt edge upon opening a letter undoubtedly would add to the impact of the letter's nontextual gesturing. Donne wrote to his brother-in-law Sir Robert More and to his friend Sir Robert Harley, among others, on gilt-edged Venice paper in 1612, 1613, and 1614 (see plate 3).³² In 1610 Jane Skipwith wrote three affectionate letters to her cousin Lewis

Bagot and an apology letter to her uncle on gilt-edged Venice paper, enclosing the pleated packets with silk floss (see plate 1a for one of these letters).³³ Frances Howard, recently widowed by Henry Pranell and known to be in love with the Earl of Southampton, wrote a letter to the famous astrologer Simon Forman on gilt-edged Venice paper on March 2, 1600, seeking his judgment on whom she might next marry.³⁴ Her paper choice reflects her class, but also her desire to influence his decision through a display of wealth and power. Other evidence for the use of gilt paper for letter writing can be found in account books: the antiquary Edward Dering bought gilt paper for his wedding in 1619 and again in 1627; Sir Arthur Capell purchased ten quires of gilt paper and ten quires of “ordinary paper” in 1629, shortly after a failed courtship; and Sir Francis Windebank requisitioned one ream of large gilt paper in 1639 for official use.³⁵ Nadine Akkerman has shown that Elizabeth of Bohemia, after the deaths of her husband and father, began using stationery edged in black.³⁶ Another letter from Donne to his brother-in-law is edged in blue.³⁷ Documented examples are scarce because the presence of colored edges is not usually recorded as a physical attribute in bibliographic descriptions of early modern letters. However, careful visual inspection of the edges of letters between early modern elite men and women would most likely reveal many more instances and add to our knowledge of when and why gilt-edged paper would have been used.

While gilt edges were a subtle signal of status and intent, decorated borders was anything but subtle. The borders of a letter from Aletheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel, to her grandmother, Bess of Hardwick, illustrated in a 1974 Sotheby’s catalog (current location unknown) are highly ornamented with gold leaf patterns and monogram letters.³⁸ Written by the countess while in her early twenties, it is a short and formulaic letter apologizing for not visiting her grandmother, and promising her sincere and affectionate desire to serve Bess. The text is filler: the point of the letter is the uniqueness of the border, a beautiful token that delights and surprises, substituting for her physical absence. The time and care taken in creating it (whether it was the work of the countess or someone else), and its echoing of the embroidered tapestries created by Bess, will hopefully save her from Bess’s disapproval or disappointment.

A simple letter of recommendation from Catherine de Bourbon, sister to King Henri IV of France, to Queen Elizabeth from the late sixteenth century has colorful decorated borders adorned with ships, monograms, and cupids (see plate 5). This makes the letter itself a token of love and respect. Catherine opens and closes the letter with the French *fermesse* symbol (resembling an italicized dollar sign with the bar tilted to connect the two ends of the S) as a further sign of her affection.³⁹ She indicates her humility and respect by leaving significant space between the end of the letter, her subscription, and her signature (Wiggins refers

to this as a split subscription).⁴⁰ It is endorsed in a contemporary hand: “A letter of the King’s sister [to] *the* Queen, more conceited for the paper than respective for the manner of writing.” In this sense, “conceited” means “elaborately or ingeniously wrought” (a definition that is now obsolete) rather than our modern sense of the word.⁴¹ Another letter from Catherine de Bourbon to Elizabeth, written on thin, milky translucent paper, has exquisitely cut ornamental margins. This one, lengthier than the first, assures the queen of her Protestant convictions, continued love and friendship, and willingness to serve her in any way she can (see plate 4).

A letter from Francis Gainsford to the Earl of Essex in 1598 is written in a predictably ornamental style, matching the border in its excessive use of praise to frame a simple request for a job captaining a company in Ireland.⁴² It differs from the other three examples in that the sender is not familiar to the recipient, and so Gainsford must remind Essex of his devoted military service to him and his undying respect. In this respect, the letter signals itself as an extraordinarily important letter, a matter of life and death, compared to the letters sent between royalty or aristocrats. Gainsford’s use of the *fermesse* in the corners reveals a surprising intimacy: the symbol typically signifies fidelity in love when it appears in letters, but can also signify friendship and political or spiritual fidelity. Through the *fermesse*, he seems to be suggesting that their duty to each other is both personal and political.

These three surviving examples with decorated borders are unique, but their similarity in motifs suggests a connection to the decorative arts in domestic spaces of large country houses—patterns and symbols on wallpaper, tapestries, ceiling beams, mantels, embroidered pillows and furniture coverings, rugs, and the samplers made by girls as their first exposure to the arts of sewing, reading, and writing.⁴³ At the same time, it harks back to the borders of illuminated personal devotional manuscripts or books of hours. The stationery’s visual and textual messages work in harmony to create a gift deserving of the recipient’s appreciation and favor.



The style of letter locking and the quality of writing paper in the early modern period was something that could probably have been detected by just about anyone, and is something that we should learn to observe when interpreting the correspondence of the political and aristocratic elite. Some forms of closure were practical and utilitarian, and some required skills and supplies that the letter writer did not possess. The many and varied ways in which surviving letters were folded and sealed suggest that the recipient of the letter was not meant to read the text alone but to read the *entire* material object, beginning with the closure

style, the seal, the quality and size of paper, the physical layout of the text, the amount of blank space, and finally, the text itself. Like the paper itself, the form of closure could signal love, secrecy, urgency, or, more commonly, that it was just another letter.

Today we know immediately when we encounter a piece of paper if it is cheap, expensive, or unusual. We know from the paper itself, from the text and its physical layout on the paper, and from the paper preparation (the way it is folded, shaped, or cut), each working in harmony or disharmony to send an overall message. Checks are sent in opaque patterned security envelopes. Greeting cards arrive in colored envelopes and the cards themselves are printed on card stock rather than paper. We would never expect to receive an electricity bill on expensive Fabriano paper, or a wedding invitation scribbled on a Post-it note. We don't need written instructions to tell us how to interpret the relationship between substrate and text, between quality and expense, and neither did early modern consumers of writing paper. By learning how to distinguish between early modern paper types and reimagining the three-dimensionality of now-flattened correspondence by using the surviving fold lines to reverse engineer the process of making a letter packet, we can make visible the shared work and intentionality that went into the creation of a seemingly familiar everyday object: the handwritten letter.

By unpacking the steps and players involved in the creation of a seemingly very simple object—the letter—we are able to uncover previously hidden dependencies and collaborations, and to view the substrate itself as part of the social bond or contract between the sender and recipient, animated by the intervention of human agents. We are also able to further untangle the complexity of gender in the household. Prescriptive literature, scripture, and cultural norms dictated that the husband was head of the household, but, as Amanda Flather notes, “the economic and practical demands of running a complex multifunctional household . . . rendered doctrines of male dominance irrelevant,” and “the organisation of domestic space was highly dynamic and at any given moment it could be used to assert authority or to signify commonality, depending upon the context.”⁴⁴ Although gender roles were well defined in aristocratic households, domestic and work-related tasks and spaces frequently overlapped, collapsing the male/public, female/private dichotomy reflected in the conduct literature. Nowhere was this more evident than through the sociomateriality of letter writing.